

SYNOD OF BISHOPS

III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELIZATION

Preparatory Document

Vatican City - 2013

I. Synod: Family and Evangelization

The mission of preaching the Gospel to all creation, entrusted directly by the Lord to his disciples, has continued in the Church throughout history. The social and spiritual crisis, so evident in today's world, is becoming a pastoral challenge in the Church's evangelizing mission concerning the family, the vital building-block of society and the ecclesial community. Never before has proclaiming the Gospel on the Family in this context been more urgent and necessary. The importance of the subject is reflected in the fact that the Holy Father has decided to call for a Synod of Bishops, which is to have a two-staged itinerary: firstly, an Extraordinary General Assembly in 2014, intended to define the "*status quaestionis*" and to collect the bishops' experiences and proposals in proclaiming and living the Gospel of the Family in a credible manner; and secondly, an Ordinary General Assembly in 2015 to seek working guidelines in the pastoral care of the person and the family.

Concerns which were unheard of until a few years ago have arisen today as a result of different situations, from the widespread practice of cohabitation, which does not lead to marriage, and sometimes even excludes the idea of it, to same-sex unions between persons, who are, not infrequently, permitted to adopt children. The many new situations requiring the Church's attention and pastoral care include: mixed or inter-religious marriages; the single-parent family; polygamy; marriages with the consequent problem of a dowry, sometimes understood as the purchase price of the woman; the caste system; a culture of non-commitment and a presumption that the marriage bond can be temporary; forms of feminism hostile to the Church; migration and the reformulation of the very concept of the family; relativist pluralism in the conception of marriage; the influence of the media on popular culture in its understanding of marriage and family life; underlying trends of thought in legislative proposals which devalue the idea of permanence and faithfulness in the marriage covenant; an increase in the practice of surrogate motherhood (*wombs for hire*); and new interpretations of what is considered a human right. Within the Church, faith in the sacramentality of marriage and the healing power of the Sacrament of Penance show signs of weakness or total abandonment.

Consequently, we can well understand the urgency with which the worldwide episcopate is called upon to gather *cum et sub Petro* to address these challenges. For example, by simply calling to

mind the fact that, as a result of the current situation, many children and young people will never see their parents receive the sacraments, then we understand just how urgent are the challenges to evangelization arising from the current situation, which can be seen in almost every part of the “global village”. Corresponding in a particular manner to this reality today is the wide acceptance of the teaching on divine mercy and concern towards people who suffer on the periphery of societies, globally and in existential situations. Consequently, vast expectations exist concerning the decisions which are to be made pastorally regarding the family. A reflection on these issues by the Synod of Bishops, in addition to it being much needed and urgent, is a dutiful expression of charity towards those entrusted to the Bishops’ care and the entire human family.

II. The Church and the Gospel on the Family

The good news of divine love is to be proclaimed to all those personally living this basic human experience of couples and of a communion open to the gift of children, which is the family community. The teachings of the faith on marriage is to be presented in an articulate and efficacious manner, so that it might reach hearts and transform them in accordance with God’s will, made manifest in Jesus Christ.

The citation of biblical sources on marriage and family in this document are essential references only. The same is true for documentation from the Magisterium which is limited to that of a universal character, including some texts from the Pontifical Council for the Family. It will be left to the bishop-participants at the synod to cite documents from their own episcopal assemblies.

In every age, and in the many different cultures, the teaching of the Pastors has been clear nor has there been lacking the concrete testimony of believers — men and women — in very diverse circumstances who have lived the Gospel of the family as an inestimable gift for their life and their children. The commitment for the next Extraordinary Synod is inspired and sustained by the desire to communicate this message with greater incisiveness, in the hope that “the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the Church, more and more fill the hearts of each person” ([DV](#), 26).

The Plan of God, Creator and Redeemer

The beauty of the biblical message on the family has its roots in the creation of man and woman, both made in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:24-31; 2:4-25). Bound together by an indissoluble sacramental bond, those who are married experience the beauty of love, fatherhood, motherhood, and the supreme dignity of participating in this way in the creative work of God.

In the gift of the fruit of their union, they assume the responsibility of raising and educating other persons for the future of humankind. Through procreation, man and woman fulfill in faith the vocation of being God’s collaborators in the protection of creation and the growth of the human family.

Blessed [Pope John Paul II](#) commented on this aspect in *Familiaris consortio*: “God created man in his own image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26, 27): calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love. God is love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8) and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion (*Gaudium et spes*, 12). Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” ([FC](#), 11).

The plan of God the creator, which was disrupted by original sin (cf. *Gen* 3:1-24), has revealed itself throughout history in the events of the chosen people up to the fullness of time, when, with the incarnation of the Son of God, not only was the divine will for salvation confirmed, but also the redemption offering the grace to follow this same will.

The Son of God, the Word made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:14) in the womb of the Virgin Mother, lived and grew up in the family of Nazareth and participated at the wedding at Cana, where he added importance to the festivities with the first of his “signs” (cf. *Jn* 2:1-11). In joy, he welcomed his reception in the families of his disciples (cf. *Mk* 1:29-31; 2:13-17) and consoled the bereaved family of his friends in Bethany (cf. *Lk* 10:38-42; *Jn* 11:1-44).

Jesus Christ restored the beauty of matrimony, proposing once again the one plan of God which was abandoned because of the hardness of the human heart, even within the tradition of the people of Israel (cf. *Mt* 5:31-32; 19:3-12; *Mk* 10:1-12; *Lk* 16:18). Returning to the beginning, Jesus taught the unity and faithfulness of the husband and wife, refuting the practice of repudiation and adultery.

Precisely through the extraordinary beauty of human love — already celebrated in a heightened manner inspired by the *Song of Songs*, and the bond of marriage called for and defended by the prophets like Hosea (cf. *Hosea* 1:2, 3.3) and Malachi (cf. *Mal* 2:13-16) — , Jesus affirmed the original dignity of the married love of man and woman.

The Church's Teaching on the Family

Even in the early Christian community the family appeared as the “domestic church” (cf. CCC, 1655): In the so-called “family canons” of the Apostolic letters of the New Testament, the great family of the ancient world is identified as the place of a profound solidarity between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between the wealthy and the poor (cf. *Eph* 5:21-6:9; *Col* 3:18-4:1; *1 Tim* 2:8-15; *Titus* 2:1-10; *1 Pt* 2:13-3:7; cf. also the *Letter to Philemon*). In particular, the Letter to the Ephesians recognized the nuptial love between man and woman as “the great mystery”, making present in the world the love of Christ and the Church (cf. *Eph* 5:31-32).

Over the centuries, especially in modern times to the present, the Church has not failed to continually teach and develop her doctrine on the family and marriage which founded her. One of its highest expressions has been proposed by the [Second Vatican Council](#) in the Pastoral Constitution [Gaudium et spes](#), which, in treating certain pressing problems, dedicated an entire chapter to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family, as seen in the description of their value for the constitution of society: “the family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the very foundation of society” ([GS](#), 52). Particularly striking is its appeal for a Christ-centered spirituality in the spouses’ life of faith: “Let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through

their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising up to life again”(GS, 52).

After the [Second Vatican Council](#), the successors of St. Peter enriched this teaching on marriage and the family, especially [Pope Paul VI](#) with the Encyclical [Humanae vitae](#), which offers specific principles and guidelines. Subsequently, in his Apostolic Exhortation [Familiaris consortio](#), [Pope John Paul II](#) insisted on proposing the divine plan in the basic truths of married love and the family: “The only ‘place’ in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself (cf. [Gaudium et spes](#), 48) which only in this light manifests its true meaning. The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom” ([FC](#), 11).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gathers together the fundamental aspects of this teaching: “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament [cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, [Gaudium et spes](#), 48; *Code of Canon Law*, 1055, 1]”(CCC 1660).

The doctrine presented in the *Catechism* touches on both theological principles and moral behaviours, developed under two separate headings: *The Sacrament of Matrimony* (nos. 1601-1658) and *The Sixth Commandment* (nos. 2331-2391). An attentive reading of these sections of the *Catechism* provides an updated understanding of the doctrine of faith, which supports the Church’s work in the face of modern-day challenges. The Church’s pastoral ministry finds inspiration in the truth of marriage viewed as part of the plan of God, who created man and woman and, in the fullness of time, revealed in Jesus the completeness of spousal love elevated to the level of sacrament. Christian marriage founded on consensus is also endowed with its own effects such as the goods and duties of the spouses. At the same time, marriage is not immune from the effects of sin (cf. Gen 3:1-24), which can cause deep wounds and even abuses to the dignity of the sacrament.

The recent encyclical of Pope Francis, [Lumen fidei](#), speaks of the family in the context of a reflection on how faith reveals “just how firm the bonds between people can be when God is present in their midst” ([LF](#), 50). “The first setting in which faith enlightens the human city is the family. I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God’s own love, and of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation, whereby spouses can become one flesh (cf. *Gen* 2:24) and are enabled to give birth to a new life, a manifestation of the Creator’s goodness, wisdom and loving plan. Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture which engages their entire lives and mirrors many features of faith. Promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one

we love” ([LF](#), 52). “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” ([LF](#), 53).

III. Questions

The following series of questions allows the particular Churches to participate actively in the preparation of the Extraordinary Synod, whose purpose is to proclaim the Gospel in the context of the pastoral challenges facing the family today.

1. The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church’s Magisterium

a) Describe how the Catholic Church’s teachings on the value of the family contained in the Bible, [Gaudium et spes](#), [Familiaris consortio](#) and other documents of the post-conciliar Magisterium is understood by people today? What formation is given to our people on the Church’s teaching on family life?

b) In those cases where the Church's teaching is known, is it accepted fully or are there difficulties in putting it into practice? If so, what are they?

c) How widespread is the Church's teaching in pastoral programmes at the national, diocesan and parish levels? What catechesis is done on the family?

d) To what extent — and what aspects in particular — is this teaching actually known, accepted, rejected and/or criticized in areas outside the Church? What are the cultural factors which hinder the full reception of the Church’s teaching on the family?

2. Marriage according to the Natural Law

a) What place does the idea of the natural law have in the cultural areas of society: in institutions, education, academic circles and among the people at large? What anthropological ideas underlie the discussion on the natural basis of the family?

b) Is the idea of the natural law in the union between a man and a woman commonly accepted as such by the baptized in general?

c) How is the theory and practice of natural law in the union between man and woman challenged in light of the formation of a family? How is it proposed and developed in civil and Church institutions?

d) In cases where non-practicing Catholics or declared non-believers request the celebration of marriage, describe how this pastoral challenge is dealt with?

3. The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization

- a) What experiences have emerged in recent decades regarding marriage preparation? What efforts are there to stimulate the task of evangelization of the couple and of the family? How can an awareness of the family as the "domestic Church" be promoted?
- b) How successful have you been in proposing a manner of praying within the family which can withstand life's complexities and today's culture?
- c) In the current generational crisis, how have Christian families been able to fulfill their vocation of transmitting the faith?
- d) In what way have the local Churches and movements on family spirituality been able to create ways of acting which are exemplary?
- e) What specific contribution can couples and families make to spreading a credible and holistic idea of the couple and the Christian family today?
- f) What pastoral care has the Church provided in supporting couples in formation and couples in crisis situations?

4. Pastoral Care in Certain Difficult Marital Situations

- a) Is cohabitation *ad experimentum* a pastoral reality in your particular Church? Can you approximate a percentage?
- b) Do unions which are not recognized either religiously or civilly exist? Are reliable statistics available?
- c) Are separated couples and those divorced and remarried a pastoral reality in your particular Church? Can you approximate a percentage? How do you deal with this situation in appropriate pastoral programmes?
- d) In all the above cases, how do the baptized live in this irregular situation? Are they aware of it? Are they simply indifferent? Do they feel marginalized or suffer from the impossibility of receiving the sacraments?
- e) What questions do divorced and remarried people pose to the Church concerning the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation? Among those persons who find themselves in these situations, how many ask for these sacraments?
- f) Could a simplification of canonical practice in recognizing a declaration of nullity of the marriage bond provide a positive contribution to solving the problems of the persons involved? If yes, what form would it take?
- g) Does a ministry exist to attend to these cases? Describe this pastoral ministry? Do such programmes exist on the national and diocesan levels? How is God's mercy proclaimed to

separated couples and those divorced and remarried and how does the Church put into practice her support for them in their journey of faith?

5. On Unions of Persons of the Same Sex

- a) Is there a law in your country recognizing civil unions for people of the same-sex and equating it in some way to marriage?
- b) What is the attitude of the local and particular Churches towards both the State as the promoter of civil unions between persons of the same sex and the people involved in this type of union?
- c) What pastoral attention can be given to people who have chosen to live in these types of union?
- d) In the case of unions of persons of the same sex who have adopted children, what can be done pastorally in light of transmitting the faith?

6. The Education of Children in Irregular Marriages

- a) What is the estimated proportion of children and adolescents in these cases, as regards children who are born and raised in regularly constituted families?
- b) How do parents in these situations approach the Church? What do they ask? Do they request the sacraments only or do they also want catechesis and the general teaching of religion?
- c) How do the particular Churches attempt to meet the needs of the parents of these children to provide them with a Christian education?
- d) What is the sacramental practice in these cases: preparation, administration of the sacrament and the accompaniment?

7. The Openness of the Married Couple to Life

- a) What knowledge do Christians have today of the teachings of [*Humanae vitae*](#) on responsible parenthood? Are they aware of how morally to evaluate the different methods of family planning? Could any insights be suggested in this regard pastorally?
- b) Is this moral teaching accepted? What aspects pose the most difficulties in a large majority of couple's accepting this teaching?
- c) What natural methods are promoted by the particular Churches to help spouses put into practice the teachings of [*Humanae vitae*](#)?
- d) What is your experience on this subject in the practice of the Sacrament of Penance and participation at the Eucharist?
- e) What differences are seen in this regard between the Church's teaching and civic education?

f) How can a more open attitude towards having children be fostered? How can an increase in births be promoted?

8. The Relationship Between the Family and the Person

a) Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the human person. How can the family be a privileged place for this to happen?

b) What critical situations in the family today can obstruct a person's encounter with Christ?

c) To what extent do the many crises of faith which people can experience affect family life?

9. Other Challenges and Proposals

What other challenges or proposals related to the topics in the above questions do you consider urgent and useful to treat?